

05/21/21 Friday

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New Mexico City Installs Joke Sign Shedding Light on Trump's Unpaid 2019 Rally Bill
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

City officials in Albuquerque, New Mexico, made the decision in late April to refer a \$200,000-plus unpaid bill owed by the reelection campaign of former US President Donald Trump to a professional collection agency. The outstanding invoice has remained unfulfilled since the campaign held a rally in 2019.

Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller has revealed that the city officially installed a new joke sign that welcomes visitors, as well as highlighting the fact that the former commander-in-chief has yet to make good on an overdue bill he incurred while on the campaign trail.

Keller unveiled the new addition to the city's various street signs on Wednesday, sharing an image of it on Twitter and noting that it was gifted by Comedy Central's Emmy-winning program "The Daily Show" and comedian Jordan Klepper.

Although the sign states, "We do not accept checks from Donald J. Trump," Keller took the opportunity on social media to clarify that the city is in fact willing to accept a valid check from Trump "for services rendered."

Keller added in a [follow-up tweet](#) that the sign is only a "temporary install."

Klepper [later responded](#) to the unveiling by jokingly warning that the continued failure to pay the invoice may prompt some individuals to "throw a pizza on [Trump's] roof." The pizza reference touches on the [ever-popular scene](#) from the TV drama "Breaking Bad" that centers around an Albuquerque family.

The Albuquerque mayor received the sign after participating in a late April interview with Klepper that saw the city official spill the beans and confirm that Trump's reelection campaign never paid off its [\\$211,175.94 debt](#).

"Trump came for a rally and we decided to bill him, because the cost to the city were tremendous," Keller had explained to Klepper. "They made us shut down downtown. We had to close city hall."

At the time, Keller revealed that the city also chose to tap the services of a collection agency after its efforts to clear the invoice were unsuccessful. "I think Mar-a-Lago is now getting those [collection] calls," the mayor said.

While the city of Albuquerque may still be holding out on the payment, it's more than likely that the bill will remain outstanding as Trump is no stranger to owing large sums, especially when it comes to his employees or contractors.

A June 2016 [exclusive report](#) by USA Today found that Trump failed to pay hundreds of workers, including waiters, painters, lawyers, dishwashers and cabinet-builders, for services rendered. Many of the cases were taken to the courts, where some disputes were closed with settlements.

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Tesla Cars Reportedly Banned From Some Chinese Government Compounds Over Security Concerns
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Reports previously detailed that China barred the use of Tesla vehicles at military complexes over concerns that information collected by the semi-autonomous automobile could prompt national security leaks. However, the move was also largely seen as part of China's efforts to separate itself from the US amid the heated tech battle between the pair.

Staffers working at Chinese government offices were recently reportedly informed that they could no longer park their Tesla vehicles inside work compounds as a result of growing security concerns that stem from the cameras installed on the cars.

Citing two sources familiar with the developments, Reuters [reported](#) on Friday that senior officials "verbally instructed" the changes to staffers in at least two government agencies located in Beijing and Shanghai.

However, it's unclear how many staffers were affected by the policy shift, if the new rule would be imposed across agencies nationwide, or if the changes were implemented at the behest of the Chinese government or simply by agency officials.

It's worth noting that while China does have its own [semi-autonomous vehicles](#) that are fitted with similar cameras and radars to assist drivers, the alleged mandate has only been enforced against the Tesla automaker.

An official response from China has not yet been issued on the matter.

Similar reports emerged in mid-March detailing that the Chinese government was moving to bar Teslas from being driven into any military compounds over fears that the car would be able to obtain confidential data and set off a national security leak.

At the time, the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) that Chinese government officials were worried that the vehicle's cameras would reveal confidential information, such as "when, how and where the vehicles are being used, as well as the contact lists of mobile phones synced to them."

The ultimate fear was that the details would somehow be leaked back to the US.

In some cases, Tesla cars were also reportedly prohibited from driving near compounds which house government employees and those working in sensitive industries.

After reports surfaced about the cars being banned from areas used by the Chinese military, Tesla founder and CEO Elon Musk [blasted](#) claims that the vehicles could be used for espionage, underscoring that "there's a strong incentive for us to be confidential."

He further pointed out that Tesla would be "shut down" if such illegal practices were tapped in China or elsewhere. Incidentally, China is the car company's second-biggest market and accounts for some 30% of its sales, according to Reuters.

Tesla vehicles are fitted with approximately eight cameras, 12 ultrasonic sensors and a radar in order for drivers to effectively use the vehicle's Autopilot setting, a feature that on its own has been the focal point of [driver safety](#) issues over the last several years.

Additionally, the Model 3 and Model Y vehicles are fitted with cabin cameras to record if and when the vehicle is involved in a collision or when its automatic braking system is triggered. However, the driver-facing cameras have raised [privacy concerns](#) over who is legally allowed to access the recordings.

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'QAnon Shaman' Ordered to Undergo Psychological Evaluation, US Judge Rules
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Jacob Chansley, better known now as the "QAnon Shaman," gained nationwide notoriety after he was photographed storming the US Capitol while donning a horned, fur-lined headdress. He has remained behind bars since early January.

A federal judge ordered Chansley to undergo a mental health evaluation on Friday after his lawyer questioned whether or not he would be competent enough to stand trial for offenses committed during the deadly US Capitol riot.

US District Judge Royce Lamberth declared in his [order](#) that Chansley must be relocated to a "suitable facility" that will effectively examine the defendant's mental standing for a period of no more than 30 days.

Aside from the evaluation offering a description of tests and examinations undertaken, officials are expected to pinpoint whether Chansley is "presently suffering from a mental disease or defect rendering him mentally incompetent to the extent that he is unable to understand the nature and consequences of the proceedings against him or to assist properly in his defense." Lamberth's order was issued after Albert Watkins, Chansley's lawyer, relayed during legal proceedings that the last several months in pretrial detention have had a lasting effect on his client's mental status and well-being.

Watkins [told](#) the Washington Post that his "goal and objective is to put [Chansley] in a position where he does not decline," and where he is able to obtain the "health care that's needed."

The legal representative also indicated that COVID-19-implemented protocols were specifically having an effect on Chansley, as the 33-year-old Arizona native was spending about 22 hours in confinement. "[That is] something even obviously the healthiest of individuals would find challenging," Watkins remarked.

Prosecutors involved in the case have not opposed the evaluation, noting that they have a standing to challenge any incompetency finding.

Chansley is presently being held on various charges, including civil disorder, obstruction of an official proceeding, and entering and remaining in a restricted building.

Earlier, Chansley made headline news after he was [transferred](#) to a different detention center so that jailers could adhere to his dietary restrictions, and again after he [remarked](#) during a CBS News interview that he stopped vandalism during the Capitol riot.

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'Deeply Disturbed': Amazon Halts Construction at Connecticut Warehouse After Finding Seven Nooses
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Since April 27, authorities in Windsor, Connecticut, have been repeatedly called to the construction site of a new Amazon warehouse after employees discovered nooses hanging from the facility's beams. "To me this is a hate crime, should be investigated as such and we won't want it to lead to anything worse," said Windsor Mayor Donald Trinks.

Amazon has announced that it will be temporarily suspending the construction of its new warehouse in Windsor after a seventh noose was found at the site, which is approximately 11 miles (18 kilometers) from the state capital of Hartford.

"We continue to be deeply disturbed by the incidents happening at the construction site in Windsor," an Amazon spokesperson told the [Associated Press](#). "Hate, racism or discrimination have no place in our society and are certainly not tolerated in an Amazon workplace."

The company has stated that it will reopen the site for construction on Monday, after additional security measures were taken.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and state police have been called in to assist Windsor authorities.

News of the temporary closure comes just a day after authorities held a news conference on the matter with the Connecticut chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

"We're here to make sure that people are safe," said Connecticut NAACP President Scot X Esdaile. "We're making sure that the voices are heard and that this situation is dealt with in a professional and adequate way."

Carlos Best, a foreman at the Amazon construction site, said on Thursday that he has "seen a lot of racism" while on this job.

"This is not the only construction site that these things occur on, and it has to stop," he told reporters.

Amazon, site contractors and the project developers have pledged a \$100,000 reward for information on the suspect - or suspects - who left the nooses.

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Chicago Mayor Accused of 'Anti-White Racism' After Prioritizing Journalists of Color for Interviews
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced this week that she would be prioritizing journalists of color for interviews on her two-year inaugural anniversary. Though Lightfoot, who is black, has argued that her decision is rooted in the promotion of diversity in the press corps, she has received pushback from various individuals and entities.

Responding to Lightfoot's decision, the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) both applauded and disagreed with the Chicago mayor.

"While her social media posts and subsequent letter have been eyebrow-raising to some, it shines a needed spotlight on the call for a greater commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion across the media industry," the organization detailed in a [statement](#).

However, the NABJ went on to highlight that, due to its history of advocacy, it could not support "excluding any bona fide journalists from one-on-one interviews with newsmakers, even if it is for one day and in support of activism."

Lightfoot's [May 19 issuance](#) detailed that "Black and Brown community leaders" have consistently reached out to her regarding the "implicit -- or explicit -- bias" in local news media. She also called on media outlets to hire reporters of color -- "especially women of color" -- to cover politics in Chicago.

"If you only have a white reporter covering City Hall, make sure there's a person of color working with them as well," she said.

However, the allowance of so-called "Black and Brown" journalists to conduct interviews presents a gray area, as it is unclear if Lightfoot would accept an interview from a white Latino journalist, or a white journalist who is also Hispanic.

Mary Ahern, a longtime NBC News reporter in Chicago, confirmed the move to The Hill earlier this week.

"Absolutely, they told me only Black and brown journalists are getting one-on-one interviews," she told the outlet. The politics reporter emphasized that if Lightfoot continued a race-based interview policy, the local NBC outlet would simply not send a reporter.

"Maybe City Hall and others should do something like sponsor scholarships for Black and brown journalists," she suggested.

Former Democratic presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard, also weighed in on the matter, calling on US President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and other politicians to denounce the mayor's "anti-white racism."

"Mayor Lightfoot's blatant anti-white racism is abhorrent. I call upon President Biden, Kamala Harris, and other leaders of our country—of all races—to join me in calling for Mayor Lightfoot's resignation," [Gabbard tweeted](#). "Our leaders must condemn all racism, including anti-white."

Gabbard was also the representative for Hawaii's 2nd congressional district from 2013 to 2021.

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Ex-Girlfriend of US Rep. Gaetz Reportedly Cooperating With Feds' Sex Trafficking Probe
by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Monday, Joel Greenberg, former tax collector and longtime associate of Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL), accepted an agreement with federal prosecutors and pleaded guilty to six charges, including the sex trafficking of a child. Although Gaetz has been referenced in court documents, the Florida congressman has not yet been indicted in the case.

A former congressional staffer who was for a time the girlfriend of Florida Republican Matt Gaetz has agreed to cooperate with federal agents in a probe of sex trafficking allegations leveled against the US lawmaker, according to a Friday report from CNN, citing "people familiar with the matter."

The woman, who remains unnamed, is perceived to be a "critical witness" due to her connection to Gaetz, which dates to the summer of 2017, the outlet detailed. Because of her connection to the congressman, her presumed knowledge of his once-public Venmo transactions could prove useful to investigators.

According to the outlet, the woman's cooperation has been in the works for some time.

This report comes just days after Greenberg [pleaded guilty](#) to six charges: sex trafficking of a child; production of a false identification document; aggravated identity theft; wire fraud; stalking, and conspiracy to commit an offense against the US.

Per Greenberg's plea agreement, the former tax collector has agreed to "to cooperate fully with the United States in the investigation and prosecution of other persons, and to testify, subject to prosecution for perjury or making a false statement, fully and truthfully before any federal court proceeding or federal grand jury in connection with the charges in this case."

Greenberg faces a minimum mandatory sentence of 12 years in prison, and a maximum sentence of life behind bars.

Alongside the sex trafficking allegations against Gaetz, the GOP lawmaker is also [under investigation](#) by the US House Ethics Committee.

Gaetz has repeatedly asserted in public and through statements from his office that he has "never had sex with a minor and has never paid for sex."

On Friday, Gaetz told Newsmax that he is not "focused on scandal," but "socialism, and what it's doing to our country."

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Cryptocurrency Mining Company Behind Vietnam Data Leaks Exposed for Poor Cybersecurity by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Last week, the government of Vietnam launched an investigation into a data leak that exposed the personal information of thousands of Vietnamese citizens. As society steps further into the cyber world, there are growing concerns about cybersecurity and the use of user data as currency.

Cybersecurity specialists around the world are calling out Pi Networks, the data consumption app behind the data leaks in Vietnam, exposing the company for its lack of transparency in how it stores user data, as well as the risk the practice poses for much larger cyberattacks in the future.

Ryan Montgomery, the chief technology officer of Pentester.com, a company that specializes in simulated cyberattacks, suggested in a Friday call with Sputnik that Pi Network is not only insecurely storing massive amounts of user data, including details of their contact information, but also stockpiling the information indefinitely, despite requests to have it removed.

Montgomery warned that with the current trend of companies storing users' personal information, a future data leak on a much larger scale is inevitable.

"If they've already been breached in one spot, chances are they are going to be breached again," Montgomery emphasized, adding that the company's initial business model may use the lingo of cryptocurrency and mining, but its alleged habit of swindling and selling user data with no real reward is essentially a "slap in the face" to the cryptocurrency community.

In a [Twitter post](#) last month, Montgomery, a well-known ethical hacker in the cyber community, posted evidence that Pi collects user contact information including names, numbers, addresses and emails and stores the data on its servers.

It was confirmed in another post earlier this week by ZenChart CEO Rick Glaser that his contact data is continuing to be stored, despite him not being an app user. In his email to Pi Network, he questions the company on its storing of his data, which Pi denies having access to.

During the initial data leak in Vietnam, Pi Network claimed that the leak was not the fault of their company, as user information is stored through a UK-based third-party, digital-identity-consuming source called Yoti.

Yoti has not responded to any reports of the data leak, but some [maintain](#) that Pi was pinpointed in an attempt to spread misinformation aimed at trying to discredit the company's legitimacy.

There are currently more than 6 million Pi Network apps downloaded onto both Apple and Google's respective devices, suggesting the company is still collecting and storing user data and those of their contacts.

The Apple's app store states that developers whose apps request access to user contact databases are banned from harvesting that information. Google's policy maintains that developers must be transparent about their collection and use of data while maintaining its protection.

After the recent data leak, two cybersecurity specialists from Vietnam, whose github usernames are ManhNho and Cu64, performed a [deep examination](#) of Pi Network servers and found that not only was Pi's data easily accessible from the company's servers, but that Pi continued to store user data even after individuals deleted their account and the application.

The Pi Network pays for Know Your Company (KYC) data through a cryptocurrency known as "Pi," which users can mine everyday by simply logging into the app and pressing a button. Pi Network was started by Stanford graduates Nicolas Kokkalis, Chengdiao Fan and Vincent McPhillip, and initially received an \$800,000 investment by selling Simple Agreement Future Equity (SAFE) instruments.

The company is currently in Phase 2 of its development, where node software is being tested before the main net launching of Pi as an exchangeable cryptocurrency. Pi currently has no real value, but users are anticipating a launch that the company maintains will happen in 2022, depending on the app's expansion.

Cryptocurrency like bitcoin use a mathematical algorithm in order to pay its users. However, Pi uses a Pi Consensus algorithm based on the Stellar Consensus Protocol stellar blockchain

model, which essentially sets up user information as nodes that grow depending on the data collected and how the user behaves.

Those who agree to use the app are asked to have their contact data accessed and used, but so far the company has not been upfront about storing the data or deleting it when requested. The idea is that Pi, like other cryptocurrency, will be free of government interference and fully decentralized. However, this drives the need for legislation and a look into ethical concerns surrounding the mining of user data, which can include information of people who are not technologically savvy.

Recent cyberattacks around the world have brought to attention questions about how much of our data is being stored, as well as the level of cybersecurity needed to ensure the protection of personal information. Last week, US President Joe Biden signed an [executive order](#) aimed at improving cybersecurity in the wake of the Colonial Pipeline cyberattack that resulted in a company shutdown and gas shortage across the US East Coast.

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'Privacy Doesn't Mean Silence': Oprah Defends Prince Harry, Meghan Amid Privacy Criticisms by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

In March, talk show host Oprah Winfrey interviewed the UK's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, in what became a conversation centered on mental health and race. In a recent partnership with Apple TV+, Harry and Winfrey released a new documentary series, entitled "The Me You Can't See," which focuses on mental health.

In an interview with NBC's "Today" show on Friday, Winfrey defended Harry and Meghan against the criticisms they received after requesting privacy, while simultaneously airing their dirty laundry to the public

"So, I think being able to have a life that you are not intruded upon by photographers, or people flying overhead, or invading your life, is what every person wants and deserves - to not to be intruded and invaded upon," Winfrey said in the [interview](#), adding, "privacy doesn't mean silence."

In the [March interview](#) with the royal couple, Harry opened up about why he stepped back from his princely duties to the British royal family, whereas Meghan detailed the treatment she experienced upon joining the family, dealing with the media spotlight and the effect it had on her mental health.

"I understood what had happened to them, and I wanted the rest of the world to come away being able to answer the question, 'Why did they leave?' And I think by the time that interview was done, people understood," Winfrey said.

Reactions to the interview had been harsh, especially from the British royal family after it was revealed during the March interview that a member of the family had raised questions about the skin complexion Archie - son of Harry and Meghan - would have. In fact, in the wake of the bombshell tell-all, reports surfaced that Prince Charles was [allegedly](#) very unhappy about the claims voiced by the royal couple.

Months following the interview, a [survey](#) conducted by YouGov found that an increasing number of younger members of the UK community wanted to do away with the monarchy, effectively preferring an elected head of state.

Harry had been hinting for years about his own unhappiness with the way he was brought up in the royal family, noting that for decades, his own mental health had been swept under the rug. Harry and Meghan have taken a “Bonnie and Clyde” -type approach to the backlash, and used the media publicity to hash out difficult topics related to mental health, and how it affects people from diverse backgrounds. Harry has also taken the opportunity to break down his royal upbringing in the documentary series, which started streaming on Apple TV+ on Friday. The newly-launched series will feature mental health stories from people all around the world, including pop star [Lady Gaga](#), who spoke on her own trauma brought on by sexual abuse she experienced as a teen.

Winfrey, who also spoke on her own experiences of abuse as a child, said in the interview that she feels that when it comes to mental health, any one person is placed on a level playing field. “It doesn’t matter where you come from, what your background is, how much money you have: we’re all in the same spectrum as everyone else,” she said.

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Psaki: White House Will Slash \$2.3 Trillion Infrastructure Bill by One-Quarter in Bid to Woo GOP by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President Joe Biden's American Jobs Plan infrastructure program is just one of several New Deal-like spending bills he has proposed since taking office in January. Others include the education and parental support-focused American Families Plan and the already-implemented American Rescue Plan, a coronavirus relief bill.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki revealed on Friday that the Biden administration had reduced the price of its massive forthcoming infrastructure bill by one-quarter, from \$2.3 trillion to \$1.7 trillion, "in the spirit of finding common ground" with reluctant Republicans.

Psaki said the White House would reveal further details about the new plan later on Friday, but noted that it would still include parts of the original deal Biden considers key to US economic growth.

Biden has said he hopes to [win bipartisan support](#) for the massive overhaul of the nation's transportation and energy sectors and was ready to compromise, but is also willing to push ahead with only Democratic support if necessary. Biden's Democratic Party controls both houses of Congress. However, Republicans retain the potent weapon of the filibuster in the Senate, which can halt debate on a bill, but which Democrats are [under increasing pressure](#) to shred as an unnecessary fetter on their legislative plans.

Earlier this week, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo sat down with leading Senate Republicans to talk about the \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan, but aside from making a \$568 billion counter-proposal, the GOP offered few details about

the contents of their alternative apart from that it sought to focus primarily on roads, bridges, waterways and broadband internet access.

Biden's original plan laid out [an eight-year program](#) to fix 20,000 miles of roads and 10,000 bridges, a dramatic expansion of public transit, and programs to remove all lead water pipes from US cities and towns, cap old oil and gas wells and [clean up old mines](#), and to jump-start the conversion to green energy. The huge project would be financed by a mixture of increases in corporate taxation and spending tax credits.

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After President's Failed Power Grab, Somalia's Governors Gather to Sort Out Election Differences

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Somalia's federal system, established after decades of civil war, gives its five states considerable power, including the ability to unilaterally veto any federal measure. The decentralized system gives states wide autonomy but creates problems when national consensus is required, such as deciding how to select a new federal government.

After a bid by Acting Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo to win a two-year term extension failed last month, Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble has gathered the heads of Somalia's five provinces to begin the task of organizing new elections. After the fragile electoral system failed to hold a regular election in December, many feared national unity was again at risk as the army began to fracture along tribal lines over support for Farmaajo.

Roble, assigned by Farmaajo last month to the task of organizing a new election, has summoned the National Consultative Forum, which includes the Federal Government of Somalia and the five Federal Member States, each of which holds considerable control over the national political process.

Mohamed Ibrahim Moalimu, a spokesperson for the federal government, [told reporters that the meeting](#) would begin on Saturday as delegations trickled into the capital of Mogadishu throughout the week.

"The prime minister is committed to having everything resolved peacefully and to prepare for the upcoming national reconciliation conference," Moalimu said. Roble's major task will be winning over Puntland President Said Abdullahi Deni and Jubaland President Ahmed Mohamed Madobe, whose states objected to the federal government's plan to hold the December 2020 elections using an older election format instead of the new one they had agreed on in September.

The elections would have been Somalia's third since the 2012 dissolution of the Transitional Federal Government, the second of two attempts at re-establishing centralized power after the outbreak of civil war in 1991.

The Devil is in the Details: Election Reform

The September negotiations created an indirect election system in which traditional elders would select candidates for parliamentary posts, shedding the old one-person-one-vote system.

While the five states broadly agreed on the terms, the details of its implementation were subjects of contention, including how votes from the northern breakaway region of Somaliland would be included. The impasse led to a delay in the December elections, which would have chosen a new president and parliament.

Thus, Farmaajo stayed in the presidential office past the end of his term in February, and parliament intervened in April to break the impasse, giving him the power to hold a new election in two years' time using a one-person-one-vote system.

Opposition parties [decried Farmaajo's move](#) as a power grab. After Roble publicly backed Jubaland's and Puntland's objections on April 27, parts of the army split along tribal loyalties, declared themselves for Roble and democracy, and took up postings along the main roads in Mogadishu. [According to AFP](#), many of them have refused to give up their positions since then. Sporadic fighting broke out between the two sides and tens of thousands fled over fears a new civil war was afoot, but the next day, when the states of Galmudug and Hirshabelle pulled their support from Farmaajo, and [international partners threatened](#) to end their financial backing of the Somali national budget, [Farmaajo relented](#). He called upon "all of the signatories of the 17 September agreement to come together immediately for urgent discussions on the unconditional implementation" of the deal.

In early May, the Somali House voted unanimously to cancel the term extension, and Foreign Minister Mohamed Abdirizak said that new elections would come quickly, likely within three months. Much of Farmaajo's power was passed to Roble, although [according to Reuters](#), some Somalis see Roble as just a puppet for Farmaajo.

On Thursday, Somalia's [international partners expressed](#) their support for the National Consultative Forum, calling it "a critical opportunity that must not be missed to advance peace and security in Somalia." The group includes the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Ethiopia, the European Union, France, Germany, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Italy, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the UK, the US and the United Nations.

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Photos: All Clear Given at Seattle's King County Courthouse After Bomb Threat Forced Evacuation

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A spokesperson for the King County Courthouse in Seattle, Washington, announced Friday afternoon that the building had been evacuated after a bomb threat was made against the institution.

According to local [news outlet KOMO](#), police were searching the building on Friday afternoon after a man who was escorted from the building made a bomb threat outside. The man is in custody and the King County Sheriff's Office said the building had been closed for the day and public services postponed.

About an hour later, the courthouse [announced on its Twitter](#) account that the Seattle Police Department had completed its search and cleared the building and were allowing occupants to return.

One of the outlet's photojournalists posted images on Twitter of a large police presence around the courthouse and road blockades keeping evacuated courthouse employees and the public away from the building. According to police, about 75 people were evacuated.

The 14-floor courthouse was built in 1916 and is located in downtown Seattle.

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Biden Says He Won't Meet With DPRK's Kim Without Prior Denuclearization Pledge
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In a Friday press conference at the White House, US President Joe Biden and South Korean President Moon Jae-in announced a number of new joint initiatives, including their approach to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), with which both nations are technically still at war.

"Our partnership is grounded on our ironclad commitment to shared security. Our alliance has long been the linchpin of peace, security, prosperity, and the region growing more prominent and us being together," Biden told reporters at the White House.

Biden said the two nations have a "shared approach" to the DPRK and that he is willing "to take pragmatic steps that will reduce tensions as we move toward our ultimate goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," but said he would only agree to sit down with DPRK State Affairs Commission president Kim Jong Un if he agreed to denuclearization beforehand. By contrast, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, a US ally in the region, [said last month](#) he is ready to meet with Kim without preconditions, continuing a policy set by his predecessor, [Shinzo Abe](#). In addition, Biden said he is unopposed to an intra-Korean dialogue.

Biden announced that his administration's new special envoy to Pyongyang will be Sung Kim, a longtime State Department diplomat who is presently the US ambassador to Indonesia, but had previously served as US ambassador to South Korea from 2011 until 2014. He has a long history of managing US relations with the DPRK, including both representing the US at the Six-Party Talks in Beijing and serving as US special representative for North Korea policy. Moon said he expects a positive response from Pyongyang at the news of Kim's appointment as envoy.

Moon told reporters their "urgent common task" is achieving complete denuclearization and lasting peace on the Korean peninsula. Although a ceasefire was signed in 1953, no permanent peace treaty was ever agreed to ending the conflict that started in 1950, so the US and South Korea still don't have permanent diplomatic relations with the DPRK.

After months of bellicose posturing against Pyongyang early in his term, former US President Donald Trump changed his tone to a more conciliatory one, and in conjunction with Moon and Kim, helped usher in a level of rapprochement never seen before in the conflict. Trump and Kim sat down for [three bilateral summits](#) in 2018 and 2019 before talks broke down. Additionally, Kim

and Moon signed an end-of-war declaration and took steps to normalize travel and trade that included visits between families divided by the tragic splitting of Korea into competing capitalist and socialist halves at the end of World War II, which helped create the two states.

The Trump-Kim talks collapsed after Trump proved unwilling to compromise on [economic sanctions](#) barring North Korea from trading in many items, including medical equipment, foodstuffs, and fuel such as coal, even as Kim [demolished several key](#) sites for the country's nuclear program as a gesture of good faith. The isolated socialist country detonated its first nuclear device in 2006, and is believed to only have a handful of nuclear weapons, which the ruling Workers Party of Korea has said are [necessary to guarantee](#) the country's safety so long as a state of war remains with the US and South Korea.

Similarly, relations between Seoul and Pyongyang [sourer once more](#) after the Kim-Trump talks fell apart, South Korean forces resumed participation in military drills with the US, and the North began testing new short-range ballistic missiles.

Moon also mentioned that he and Biden had agreed to abolish US missile range guidelines, meaning that the US will no longer prevent Seoul from [fielding ballistic missiles](#) with a range of more than 497 miles. A memorandum of understanding with the US in 1979 intended to limit the spread of ballistic missile technology allowed Seoul to develop short-range weapons, but then-US President Barack Obama doubled the limit in 2012 and in 2017, Trump removed the corresponding payload limit entirely, allowing for much more destructive weapons to be fielded. However, the message is aimed at Beijing, not Pyongyang, since the furthest point in North Korea is just 315 miles from South Korean territory. Moon also mentioned on Friday that he would be cooperating with Biden on security matters related to Taiwan.

Moon also said the US and South Korea would establish a "comprehensive partnership" on COVID-19 vaccines to "boost vaccine supply, so that we can accelerate the rollout of vaccines to the entire world, especially in the Indo-Pacific region."

"The US has the ability to develop vaccines and Korean companies have the capacity to produce biomedicines," he explained.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Corporate America Exploits Racial Disunity to Crush Unions

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US workers must overcome racial divisions to unionize or corporate America will continue dismantling the labor movement through coercive tactics and propaganda, organizers and experts told Sputnik.

The labor movement suffered a significant blow in April when workers at an Amazon plant in Alabama voted against unionizing, although the US National Labor Relations Board is trying to reverse the results, arguing that the company interfered with the election.

DECIMATION OF UNIONS

US workers have taken a beating over the past four decades, which organizers believe is a major reason for the constantly growing inequality gap. The top 1% of America's richest control

40 percent of US wealth, according to Federal Reserve figures, while corporate pay continues to disproportionately surge.

CEOs make around 300 times more than the typical American worker, the Economic Policy Institute revealed in a study last year. Executive compensation surged 100% from 2009-2019 while regular worker salaries grew by just 7.6 percent, the report said.

Meanwhile, labor unions, once the key mechanism for protecting workers' rights and salaries, have been decimated for decades. Today, only about 10 percent of the US workforce is unionized, according to government data, dropping from a high of 35 percent in the 1950s. The labor movement also saw a huge setback in 2018, when the US Supreme Court, in the landmark *Janus v AFSCME* decision, ruled that unions could not collect fees from non-members in the public sector, despite those workers enjoying the fruits of union-negotiated wages and benefits. The court ruled that the precedent violated the First Amendment right to free speech. Bill Fletcher Jr., a former senior staffer with the AFL-CIO, the country's largest federation of unions, told Sputnik labor unions are the antidote to inequality but the scales are heavily weighted in favor of corporations and businesses.

In fact, Fletcher said, there is significant oppression of workers by US corporations.

"Employers have the right intrinsic in capitalism to intimidate workers," Fletcher said. "The answer sometimes given is freedom of speech but that's relative. If you're in debt to me, you don't have the same freedom of speech as I do."

He said the most fundamental of questions is always avoided.

"Why should employers have any right to choose the workers right to represent them when most employees don't have a right to audit books?" Fletcher asked.

AMAZON 'BRAINWASHING'

Many activists feel mega-corporations like Amazon illustrate the perverse nature of the current economic system. They have argued that while Amazon, whose founder, Jeff Bezos, is now the richest man in the world, pays employees better than most, working conditions are brutal.

Amazon workers have said they suffer high injury rates, for example, while inadequate time is allowed for breaks.

In other words, a labor rights proponent might argue, all signs indicate an environment conducive for establishing a union.

However, employees themselves have testified that, using insidious methods, Amazon was able to win the battle over worker hearts and minds.

At a US congressional hearing on March 17, Amazon employee Jennifer Bates told lawmakers the company used coercive tactics to ensure workers did not vote for unionizing.

Bates also said Amazon forced them into mandatory "union education" meetings and sent anti-union messages to workers' phones.

Veteran labor organizer Dwight Kirk provided a chilling assessment of the implications regarding the methods successfully employed by Amazon.

"If a company can have unimpeded access to brainwash, lie, distort the whole narrative without rebuttal, it's hard to expect any union would be able to counter that," Kirk told Sputnik.

BLACK-WHITE DISUNITY

Jon Jeter, author of a new book about unions, "*Flat Broke in the Free Market: How Globalization Fleeced Working People*," however, argued that the unions are down due to internal decay as well.

"There is no labor movement in the US anymore," Jeter told Sputnik. "The movement is disorganized, feckless and union leaders are just worthless. Also, I don't think we have the attitude or class consciousness for anything else to be different."

The elephant in the room, Jeter contends, is the inability of white workers to unite with Black workers for mutual benefit.

"They don't want to work with Black people because they see us as competition, still," Jeter said.

Jeter said he laments the way in which corporate elites, politicians and other cynical players have been able to manipulate American workers along racial and class lines. But if white Americans can overcome their racial blind spot, then workers might have a chance and come out on top.

Jeter said in 1864, Karl Marx wrote a letter to white America that was prophetic and prescient, telling them "you're halfway there. You have to embrace black labor." Marx' words went unheeded for 157 years "because white people see themselves as white and not workers," Jeter argued.

"When they see themselves as workers, then we can begin to change this thing," Jeter said.

Over the past 30 years, Jeter said, investors controlled 60% of US gross domestic product.

"What racism is about is white people fighting to take as much of the 40 percent from us as possible," Jeter said.

Kirk said white flight has hurt unions over the past four decades, a decline that started when then-President Ronald Reagan busted the pilot unions in 1981.

"The solid white working class left and the state attacked and prohibited union organizing, making it extremely hard to win a union election," Kirk said.

On the other hand, Kirk said labor leadership actually took black support for granted in the Amazon case.

"The presumption was that Black people usually vote for unions, but a combination of things happened. Sometimes our folks get ahead of certain facts," he said.

STAYING ALIVE

Despite the corporate negative propaganda, public opinion for unions in the United States stands at a 15-year high. A recent Gallup poll revealed that more than 60 percent of Americans back unions.

"The trade union movement is still in a defensive posture although in the last two years, membership has increased by about 200,000 members," Kirk said.

Many expected public sector unions were going to be decimated by the Janus decision, Kirk said.

"But they have become far more aggressive and organized, letting people understand that they needed protection," Kirk explained.

These assorted tempests, he added, have forced union organizers to become more innovative and resourceful.

At the end of the day, Kirk concluded, unions must develop communication strategies to overcome fears and persuade people to form bonds.

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RPT - Reagan's Ex-Adviser Says Wants Russian Citizenship But Has Not Filed Forms Yet

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US writer and scholar on Russia, Suzanne Massie, who was an adviser to President Ronald Reagan, told Sputnik she wanted to obtain Russian citizenship to aid in her work and writing but has not filed official papers yet.

"I have not [filed] any official form yet," Massie said.

Massie, 90, asked Russian President Vladimir Putin for Russian citizenship in a televised appearance on national broadcaster NTV in Moscow. She attended the May 9 Victory Day parade in Moscow.

The Kremlin said earlier this week it has not yet considered Massie's request.

Speaking of the reasons for her request, Massie explained that Russian citizenship will allow her to spend more time in Russia and write books.

"I have spent forty years traveling and working in Russia, and writing books about Russia," she said. "I am now in the process of writing a new book and will need to spend longer periods in Russia."

The process of getting visas now is "endless and difficult," Massie added.

Massie advised Reagan on Russia from 1984-1988 and played a significant role in the final years of the Cold War. She taught the president a Russian proverb, "trust, but verify," which he famously used during nuclear disarmament talks with the Soviet Union.

Massie is fluent in Russian and has written numerous books on Russian history and culture, including bestsellers *Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia*, as well as *Trust but Verify: Reagan, Russia and Me*.

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US Agrees to Terminate Flight Range Limitations of South Korean Missiles - Moon

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States agreed to end the flight range guidelines that limited South Korea's missiles to 800 kilometers (450 miles), South Korean President Moon Jae-in said in a joint press conference with President Joe Biden.

"It is also with pleasure that I deliver the news on the termination of the revised missile guidelines," Moon said during remarks at the White House on Friday.

The two sides also agreed to further reinforce their combined defense posture, Moon said.

The missile guideline was issued in 1979, when South Korea was given US technologies and components for developing its own missiles. As a result of two revisions in 2001 and 2012, the permitted range of South Korean missiles was increased from the initial 180 kilometers to 300 kilometers and then 800 kilometers.

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Blinken, Cavusoglu Discuss Importance of Cooperation Between US, Turkey - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu discussed in a telephone call the importance of the United States and Turkey continuing cooperation on global matters including Syria and Afghanistan, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

The United States and Turkey have been at odds over the US recognizing Armenian mass killings over a century ago as genocide and Washington's support for Israel in its recent 11-day battle with Palestinians.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavusoglu today," Price said in the release on Friday. "Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Cavusoglu discussed the importance of cooperation between the United States and Turkey, including our shared interests in Syria and Afghanistan."

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Biden Administration Pulls Salvadoran Government Aid Over Corruption Concerns - USAID

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has pulled US funding for the Salvadoran government due to concerns of corruption in the country's justice system, US Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Samantha Power said.

"USAID has deep concerns regarding the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly's May 1st vote to remove the Attorney General and all five magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber of El Salvador's Supreme Court, and larger concerns about transparency and accountability," Powers said in a press release on Friday. "In response, USAID is redirecting assistance away from these institutions, the National Civilian Police, and the Institute for Access to Public Information." Power said the US funding will now go to local civil society and human rights group that will work in partnership with the United States to combat corruption and monitor human rights. The Biden administration has said it is trying to improve economic and security issues in the Northern Triangle countries that are driving hundreds of thousands of migrants to seek asylum in the United States.

The administration has also said it will consider using Global Magnitsky sanctions and revoking visas of officials in Guatemala, El Salvador and Guatemala who are engaged in corruption or human rights abuses.

Russia and El Salvador have recently expressed interest in enhancing cooperation in the political, commercial and other areas.

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Biden Says Will Not Let US Justice Department Seize Journalists' Phone Records

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said he will not let his Justice Department seize journalists' telephone records as part of investigations into leaks of classified information to the media.

"It's simply, simply wrong. I will not let that happen," Biden said after press conference on Friday when asked if he would prevent his Justice Department from seizing reporters' phone records. Earlier in May, the Washington Post said President Donald Trump's Justice Department obtained phone records from The Washington Post's journalists related to their reporting on Russia's alleged role in the 2016 election.

Federal investigators were trying to uncover proof of collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign in the 2016 election, but ultimately uncovered no evidence of such a conspiracy. The subpoenas to obtain the phone records were obtained last year as part of a criminal investigation into unauthorized disclosure of classified information by officials with access to national defense information.

Trump's Justice Department obtained three-and-a-half months worth of phone records from Washington Post reporters Ellen Nakashima, Greg Miller and former reporter Adam Entous. The Justice Department was investigating their reporting in 2017 related to the investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election.

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US, S. Korea Deeply Concerned, Ready for Diplomatic Steps Toward N. Korea - Biden

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea are deeply concerned by the issue of the denuclearization of North Korea and willing to reduce tensions via diplomatic steps, US President Joe Biden said during a joint press conference with the President Moon Jae-in.

"My team consulted closely with President Moon's team throughout the process of our DPRK [North Korea policy] review, and we both are deeply concerned about the situation. Our two nations also share a willingness to engage diplomatically with the DPRK to take pragmatic steps that will reduce tensions, as we move toward our ultimate goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Biden said on Friday.

Moon shared his counterparts concern, adding that denuclearization is the most urgent task the two countries must undertake to ensure permanent peace on the Korean peninsula. The United States and South Korea worked closely during the Biden administration's review of the US policy toward North Korea, Moon noted.

Biden said he appointed Ambassador Sung Kim, a career diplomat with deep policy expertise, to serve as the United States' next special representative for North Korea as diplomatic work begin to achieve full denuclearization.

The dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang, as well as the inter-Korean dialogue, have been stalled since the failed February 2019 summit in Hanoi, during which the United States demanded more decisive steps from North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, while Pyongyang accused the United States of not responding to prior commitments. Further denuclearization talks in Sweden in October 2019 failed to break the deadlock.

Moon said Biden expressed support for the inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation.

Moreover, Biden said South Korea agreed to boost cooperation with the United States on the development of a cutting-edge 5G network.

Moon added that both countries also agreed to cooperate on space exploration and nuclear energy.

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US, South Korea to Establish Comprehensive Cooperation on Coronavirus Vaccines - Leaders

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea agreed to establish a comprehensive cooperation to increase the global supply of coronavirus vaccines, South Korea President Moon Jae-in announced during a joint press conference with US President Joe Biden. "There will be a comprehensive partnership to be established between our two nations. There has been an agreement between our two sides on that. The US has the ability to develop vaccines and Korean companies have the capacity to produce biomedicines," Moon said on Friday.

Moon also said the two countries will combine those capabilities to "boost vaccines supply, so that we can accelerate the rollout of vaccines to the entire world, especially in the Indo-Pacific region."

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US to Provide Coronavirus Vaccines to 550,000 South Korean Troops - Biden

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden announced that the United States will fully vaccinate 550,000 South Korean soldiers, sailors and airmen who work in close contact with their US forces on a regular basis.

"We will provide full vaccinations for all 550,000 of those Korean forces engaging with American forces on a regular basis both for their sake as well as the sake of the American forces," Biden said during a joint press conference with South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

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South Korea to Strengthen Ties With US on 5G Networks, Nuclear Power Plants - Moon

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea will strengthen their cooperation in a range of civil work including the development of 5G networks, nuclear power plants, and space exploration, South Korean President Moon Jae-in said in a joint press conference with President Joe Biden.

"[South] Korea and the United States in response to a post COVID-19 era plan to strengthen our cooperation in civil space exploration, 5G and green energy to secure global competitiveness," Moon said during remarks at the White House on Friday. "Furthermore, to join the advance into overseas nuclear power plants market, we decided to both draw our partnership."

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US, South Korea 'Closely Coordinated' During North Korea Policy Review - Moon

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea worked closely during the Biden administration's review of the US policy toward North Korea, South Korean President Moon Jae-in said during a press conference.

"Recently, the Biden administration concluded its DPRK [North Korea] policy review, building on past agreements - including the Singapore Joint Statement - while taking a calibrated and practical approach to seeking diplomacy with North Korea. It's indeed a welcome direction of the

Biden administration's North Korea policy. During the course of the review, our two countries closely coordinated with each other in lock step," Moon said on Friday.

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S. Korea Leader Says Most Urgent Common Task With US Denuclearization of Korean Peninsula

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - South Korea and the United States' most urgent task is the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, South Korean President Moon Jae-in said in a joint press conference with President Joe Biden.

"The most urgent common task that our two countries must undertake is achieving complete denuclearization and permanent peace on the Korean peninsula," Moon said during remarks at the White House on Friday.

Moon added that Biden supports intra-Korean dialogue and cooperation.

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US, South Korea to Boost Cooperation on Building 5G Network - Biden

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea will bolster cooperation on emerging technologies, including the construction of a cutting-edge 5G network, US President Joe Biden said during a press conference with South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

"We also talked about how to harness our nations' technological advantages to ensure the Republic of Korea and the United States are cooperating to shape emerging technologies around our shared value system. This includes everything from strengthening our cybersecurity to deepening our cooperation to build out an open, secure [5G] network," Biden said on Friday.

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Biden Appoints Special Envoy for North Korea

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he has appointed Ambassador Sung Kim as the United States' special envoy for North Korea.

"I am pleased to announce that Ambassador Sung Kim, a career diplomat with deep policy expertise, will serve as US special envoy for the DPRK [North Korea]," Biden said during a joint press conference with the South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

Biden reiterated his willingness to engage diplomatically with North Korea "to take pragmatic steps that will reduce tensions as we move toward our ultimate goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

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WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea are deeply concerned by the issue of the denuclearization of North Korea and willing to reduce tensions via diplomatic steps, US President Joe Biden said during a joint press briefing with the President Jae-in Moon. "We spoke about the shared approach to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK] and continuing threat of the DPRK nuclear and missile programs. My team consulted closely with President Moon team throughout the process of our DPRK review, and we both are deeply concerned about the situation. Our two nations also share a willingness to engage diplomatically with the DPRK to take pragmatic steps that will reduce tensions, as we move toward our ultimate goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Biden said on Friday.

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New York Attorney General Proposes Legislation to Limit Use of Force by Police

NEW YORK, May 22 (Sputnik) - New York Attorney General Letitia James proposed the Police Accountability Act reform that aimed to amend the use of force by law enforcement agents from necessity to absolutely last resort.

"For far too long, police officers in this country have been able to evade accountability for the unjustified use of excessive and lethal force," James said in a statement on Friday. "The Police Accountability Act will make critical and necessary changes to the law, providing clear and legitimate standards for when the use of force is acceptable and enacting real consequences for when an officer crosses that line."

The Police Accountability Act will require officers to exhaust other options, such as de-escalation, verbal warnings and lower levels of force before using force, including lethal force.

In addition, the reform will prohibit police officers from the use of lethal force based on only suspicion and will require that force can be used under the most pressing circumstances with higher standards of proof.

If approved, the legislation will also establish criminal penalties for officers who employ excessive force and where force causes physical injury or death.

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Migrant Children in US Custody Drops Below 20,000 for First Time Since April - DHS

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The number of migrant children in US federal custody dropped below 20,000 for the first time since the first week of April, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) revealed.

The DHS showed data on Friday that there are currently 19,792 migrant children in US custody at federal care facilities.

The migrant children were apprehended at the US-Mexico border after illegally crossing into the United States without a parent or guardian.

There are 621 migrant children in Customs and Border Protection custody and 19,171 in Health and Human Services.

In April, a total of 17,171 migrant children arrived at the US southern border alone, which represents a slight drop from the record set in March with nearly 19,000 arrivals of unaccompanied migrant children.

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Blinken, Palestinian President Discuss Measures to Ensure Ceasefire Holds - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas discussed over the telephone measures to ensure that the recently established ceasefire with Israel holds, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas," Price said in a press release on Friday. "The Secretary and President welcomed the ceasefire and discussed measures to ensure that it holds."

On Thursday, Israel and the Hamas movement agreed to an Egypt-brokered ceasefire, after 11 days of rocket attacks and airstrikes that left 243 Palestinians and 12 Israelis dead.

Blinken assured Abbas the United States will provide rapid humanitarian aid and gather international support for Gaza and its reconstruction efforts, Price said.

The two officials agreed to have open lines of communication at all levels, Price said. Abbas welcomed Blinken's upcoming trip to the region in the coming days to meet with Palestinian, Israeli, and regional government officials to discuss the way forward towards peace, Price added.

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South Korea Continues to Engage With US on Issue of Denuclearization - President

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - South Korea will continue to engage with the United States on the issue of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, President Moon Jae-in said during his meeting with the US President Joe Biden at the White House.

"Korea will closely work with the US to achieve complete denuclearization and establish permanent peace on the Korean peninsula," Moon said on Friday.

South Korea and the United States have maintained a strong partnership during the last decades, he said.

"We affirmed our joint commitment to strengthening the ROK-US alliance, and bringing peace on the Korean peninsula," Moon added.

During the talks, Biden noted that both countries were allies during their long history of bilateral relations.

"I also want to point out that our history of shared sacrifice and our cooperation is vital to maintain peace and stability in a critical region the world," Biden said.

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Blinken, Palestinian President Discuss Measures to Ensure Ceasefire Holds - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas discussed over the telephone measures to ensure that the recently established ceasefire with Israel holds, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas," Price said in a press release. "The Secretary and President welcomed the ceasefire and discussed measures to ensure that it holds."

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Biden Administration Reviewing US Federal Execution Policy - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is reviewing the policy that allows federal executions that was revived during the previous Trump administration last year after a 17-year hiatus, court documents revealed.

"The Department of Justice, however, is actively reviewing its policies and procedures concerning the administration of capital punishment," the court document said on Friday. Although Biden has publicly opposed the death penalty, he has not taken any action toward abolishing it so that future US presidents cannot resume the practice. President Donald Trump's administration executed 13 inmates on death row after it resumed federal executions last July following a 17-year hiatus.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) -

MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

* At least 15 Palestinians were injured in clashes with Israeli police, which began on the territory of the Al-Aqsa Mosque on top of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem after the Friday prayer, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

* The United Nations is very concerned about the continued clashes in East Jerusalem less than 24 hours after the Israel-Hamas ceasefire announcement and calls on all parties to show restraint and avoid provocations, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

* UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock allocated an additional \$4.5 million to provide humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians in Gaza, Dujarric said.

* The situation on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where riots broke out after Friday prayer, was taken under the control of the Israeli police, 16 suspects were detained, Israeli police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told Sputnik.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* The United States itself, without any external pressure, decided to suspend the work of the consulates general in Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* The ban on hiring local citizens by the US and Czech embassies in Russia does not contradict the Vienna Convention, Zakharova said.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov qualified as very frank his recent conversation with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, held on the sidelines of the Arctic Council's ministerial meeting.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

* The Committee of Permanent Representatives in the European Union unanimously backed the bloc's political agreement to introduce digital coronavirus passports to facilitate travel in the EU.

* China will provide extra \$3 billion in international assistance over the next three years to support COVID-19 pandemic response and economic recovery in developing countries, President Xi Jinping announced.

UKRAINE SANCTIONS AGAINST ROSSIYA SEGODNYA

* Kiev's extension of sanctions against the Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency is senseless and ridiculous, and this decision of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy confirmed his rejection of freedom of speech, Dmitry Kiselev, the agency's director general, said on Friday.

* Russia strongly condemns Kiev's sanctions against Russian media, they contradict international law and European conventions in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms, primarily freedom of the media, a source in Moscow told Sputnik.

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US Imposes New Sanctions on Russian Entities, Vessels Linked to Nord Stream 2 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The US government has imposed sanctions against 13 Russian vessels and three entities linked to the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, the US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced on Friday. The entities include Mortransservice, Samara Heat and Energy Property Fund as well as Russia's Marine Rescue Service. Among the sanctioned Russian vessels are Akademik Cherskiy, Vladislav Strizhov, Yury Topchev and Baltiskiy Issledovatel.

However, the Treasury Department said it authorized certain transactions with the Marine Rescue Service that are not related to the Nord Stream 2 or TurkStream projects.

"All transactions and activities prohibited by [the sanctions]... involving Federal State Budgetary Institution Marine Rescue Service (MRS), or any entity in which MRS owns, directly or indirectly... that are not related to the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, the TurkStream pipeline project, or any project that is a successor to either such project, are authorized," the Treasury Department said.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is 95 percent complete, is designed to transport natural gas from Russia to Germany. The project has been met with opposition from the Biden administration and some US lawmakers who have said the pipeline threatens European energy independence and US interests.

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US Man Sentenced to 10Yrs for Telephone Fraud Targeting Spanish - Speakers - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – California man Angel Armando Adrianzen has been sentenced to 10 years and one month in prison for conspiracy to defraud Spanish-speakers in the US using call centers located in Peru, the US Justice Department said on Friday.

"A California man has been sentenced to more than 10 years in prison for partnering with call centers in Peru that defrauded Spanish-speaking U.S. residents through lies and threats," the Department said in a release. "Ultimately, Adrianzen processed over \$3,500,000 in payments as part of the scheme."

The Department said that the defendant cooperated with a number of Peruvian call centers to contact recent immigrants while the callers pretended to be government representatives who threatened the victims with court proceedings, immigration consequences if they did not immediately pay for the purportedly delivered products and settlement fees.

Adrianzen admitted that from April 2011 to September 2019, he participated in a fraudulent telemarketing scheme that offered various products to Spanish-speaking consumers in the

United States to obtain payments from the victims and also assisted his co-conspirators in Peru to set up and train staff of the calling centers.

The defendant was also sentenced for two counts of possession of child pornography, found on his laptop computer and cell phone, according to the release.

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US Imposes New Sanctions on Russian Entities, Vessels Linked to Nord Stream 2

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The US has issued sanctions against 13 Russian vessels and three entities linked to the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced on Friday.

The entities in question include Mortransservice, Samara Heat and Energy Property Fund, and Russia's Marine Rescue Service. However, the US also issued a license allowing certain transactions with the Marine Rescue Service despite the sanctions.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is 95% complete, is designed to transport natural gas across the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany. It has been met with opposition from the Biden administration, who views the project as threatening European energy independence.

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US Recovery Might Be Better if Fed Starts Thinking Tighter Monetary Policy - Fed Bankers

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve might have put a super shield around the US economy amid the COVID-19 but to ensure economic stability, it would be wise for the central bank to start thinking of a timeline for reducing bond-buying and other supportive measures like ultra-low interest rates, two senior Fed bankers said.

An approach, or at least discussion, towards tighter monetary policy now could ensure a gentler landing for the economy later, Patrick Harker and Robert Kaplan, Fed chiefs for the Philadelphia and Dallas regions respectively, said in public forums held Friday.

"I'd gently take the foot off the accelerator now than slam the brakes down the road," Harker told a virtual conversation organized by the Washington Post, referring to the so-called tapering, an exercise that involved buying less bonds and raising interest rates that the Fed would eventually have to do. "I'd rather act sooner rather than later."

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, the Fed has kept US interest rates at between zero and a quarter percentage point to help the economy get back on its feet. It has also been buying at least \$80 billion per month of Treasury securities and a minimum of \$40 billion per month of agency mortgage-backed securities to stimulate recovery.

The economy shrank 3.5 percent in 2020 but rebounded by an annualized rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of this year. The Fed has forecast a 6.5 percent growth for all of 2021.

The problem for the central bank though is that economic data since last month have also shown an uptick in inflation, via higher consumer and producer prices and industrial production and consumer confidence. Prices of almost everything, from houses to the lumber that goes into building them, have soared too, scaring economists into believing that inflation growth in 2021 could be the highest in 35 years.

The Fed acknowledges the price pressures arising from bottlenecks in US supply chains struggling to cope with demand in an economy reopening after months of pandemic-suppression.

But the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), led by Chairman Jerome Powell, insists that these inflationary pressures are "transitory" and will fade as the economy makes a full recovery from the pandemic. The FOMC also does not see the immediate need to raise interest rates.

But some Fed bankers like Philadelphia chief Harker are having a rethink of the path advocated by the FOMC.

Kaplan is another senior Fed official encouraging discussion on the impact of the hundreds of billions of dollars the central bank has spent since last year to prop up the economy.

"I am beginning to feel differently regarding the advantages and drawbacks of the Fed's QE purchases," Kaplan told a technology conference, referring to the quantitative easing, or bond-buying, program of the central bank.

The Dallas Fed chief said he was against setting a hard timeline for tightening, but also did wish for policymakers to sit too long on a change.

"I am concerned about housing sector excesses and imbalances," Kaplan said. "On policy change, we don't want to move too fast, but we also don't want to act too late."

The Fed has a dual mandate of ensuring maximum employment and sustainable inflation, and it is no secret which of the two the central bank is prioritizing, analysts told Sputnik.

The Consumer Price Index, the world's most popular inflation gauge, rose 4.2 percent in the United States in the 12 months to April for its largest increase in almost 13 years. The Producer Price Index, a measure of what wholesalers pay for goods, meanwhile, grew 6.2 percent in the year to April, the most in a decade.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. At least eight million of those jobs have not returned, the Labor Department says.

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US Judge Rules to Keep Dakota Access Pipeline Open Despite Opposition from Tribes - Filing

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge on Friday ruled to keep the \$3.7 billion Dakota Access pipeline operating regardless of concerns from Native American tribes involved in the legal battle to shut it down, a court filing revealed.

"As the Tribes have not carried their burden to demonstrate a likelihood of irreparable injury absent an injunction, the Court must deny them the relief they seek," US District Judge James

Boasberg wrote in the ruling. "It does not reach that conclusion lightly. Fully aware of the unshakable indignities visited upon the Tribes across generations, the Court, as it has throughout this litigation, scrutinizes the record with care."

The court filing said the Army Corps of Engineers is expected to complete a new environmental impact statement for the pipeline by March 2022.

Earlier this month, the Army Corps of Engineers revealed through court documents that the Biden administration continued to support leaving the Dakota Access pipeline open even though a new environmental review is pending.

In April, Boasberg during a court hearing delayed a decision about whether to allow the Dakota Access pipeline to continue operating in order to give the project's developer Energy Transfer LP additional time to update information about the potential economic consequences associated with shutting down the pipeline. The Army Corps of Engineers during the court hearing said they did not plan to shut down operations regardless of the pending litigation.

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, and other tribes involved in the legal battle recently expressed disappointment over the Biden administration's decision to keep Dakota Access pipeline operations alive without the proper authorization.

The tribes have been in a three-year legal battle with the Trump administration and the pipeline's parent company, Energy Transfer Partners, to prevent the Dakota Access Pipeline from passing through their sacred land, which they also say threatens vital water resources. Former President Donald Trump expedited the approval of the Dakota Access pipeline project as soon as he came into office in January 2017. Between 2016 to 2017, protesters participated in mass demonstrations against the pipeline, which resulted in law enforcement using force against protesters in order to allow the construction of the pipeline to be completed.

The Dakota Access Pipeline is used to move some 570,000 barrels of oil per day from Stanley, North Dakota through South Dakota, Iowa and Illinois to a tank farm in Patoka, Illinois.

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Florida Man Admits to Threatening to Behead US Senator - DOJ

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - A Florida man has pleaded guilty to calling a US senator's office and leaving voicemails in which he threatened to cut off the senator's head, the DOJ announced on Friday.

"Brian Christopher King (62, Interlachen) has pleaded guilty to transmitting communications in interstate commerce that contained threats to injure the person of another. He faces a maximum penalty of five years in federal prison. A sentencing date has not been set," the DOJ said.

King left two profanity-laden voicemails for the senator in March of 2020, in which he threatened to behead the official. Four days later, when interviewed by investigators, he admitted that it was him in the voicemails, but argued that he had no intention to travel to Washington, DC and do it. This was not the first time that King had been investigated and warned about such issues, having had a similar run-in with the law back in 2018, in which he had been warned by an FBI agent that making such threats was a serious offense.

He faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison for the crime. A date for sentencing has yet to be set.

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St. Petersburg Celebrates Int'l Tea Day With Russian-Styled Bash Hosting Over 30 Diplomats
WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - A veritable tea party, which the organizers called "Diplomats around the Samovar" attracted some 30 general and honorary consuls and consulate staff members on Friday in Russia's St. Petersburg to celebrate International Tea Day.

The get-together was hosted in the style akin to the musical salon parties common in 17th century Russia.

The host of the event, chairman of the city's External Affairs Committee Evgeny Grigoriev, noted that tea was an integral part of Russian tradition for centuries noting that it dated back as early as the 12th century.

"When it was first imported in the 17th century from China, tea was very expensive and so was only consumed by the upper classes and the elite of imperial St. Petersburg," he explained to guests drinking tea brewed in a samovar, a necessary item in every aristocratic household in Russia.

"In Turkey, tea is consumed all day. Offering tea and drinking tea together is a gesture of friendship," Turkish General consul in St. Petersburg Mehmet Ferhan Yorulmaz told Sputnik at the event, expressing hope that Russian tourists would get a chance to experience his country's hospitality soon after the flights from Russia are resumed.

International Tea Day is observed annually on May 21 when the season of tea production begins in most of the tea-producing countries.

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Boko Haram Leader Abubakar Shekau Dead After Clash With IS Terror Group - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau is dead after he detonated a suicide vest during an ambush by his rival Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday citing Nigerian officials and intelligence it reviewed from a West African spy agency.

The report said hundreds of Islamic State fighters attacked Shekau's base in the Timbuktu region of the Sambisa Forest on Wednesday.

In 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and Boko Haram rebranded itself as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). However, internal disputes that involved the Islamic State naming another leader to lead ISWAP pushed Shekau to reassume the leadership role of the Boko Haram faction.

Boko Haram has operated in northeast Nigeria and several other Western African nations, conducting numerous deadly attacks and abductions, since it initiated an Islamic insurgency in 2009.

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Lawmakers Urge Biden to Redirect \$50Bln From Afghan War to End Homelessness – Letter

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – The US government should redirect the \$50 billion savings from withdrawing all its military forces from Afghanistan to end homelessness and tackle other domestic social problems, Democratic Representatives Mark Pocan and Barbara Lee wrote in a letter signed by 21 other House members to President Joe Biden on Friday.

“Estimates indicate that as much as \$50 billion will be freed up by withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. It could end homelessness in the United States provide increased health coverage to Americans in need or contribute to the ongoing battle against the COVID-19 pandemic,” Pocan and Lee wrote to Biden.

In their letter, progressive lawmakers Pocan and Lee urged Biden to use the financial savings made from his full military withdrawal, due to be completed by September 11, for socially constructive purposes domestically instead.

The House members, all Democrats, urged the president to reconfigure his budgetary request for Fiscal Year 2022 to factor in the “peace dividend” savings. Signatories included Representatives Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Ro Khanna.

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Biden Presents Medal of Honor to 94-Year-Old Veteran for Acts of Valor - White House

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden presented the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest US military award for bravery, to 94-year-old retired Army Colonel Ralph Puckett for acts of bravery performed more than 70 years ago during the Korean War at a White House ceremony on Friday.

“We are awarding an honor that is long overdue,” Biden, 78, said at the ceremony. “I am incredibly proud to give Colonel Ralph Puckett’s act of valor the recognition it has so richly deserved.”

In November 1950, as a 24-year-old First Lieutenant who had recently graduated from West Point Military Academy, Puckett led a force that captured a strategic hill and held it against strong, numerically superior Chinese attacks during the Korean War.

“After 70 years I would have walked it to you,” Biden told Puckett.

Visiting South Korean President Moon Jae-in attended the ceremony Friday before holding his first summit meeting with Biden.

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US Has Strong Assurances that Israel-Gaza Ceasefire Will Hold - White House

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The US has received assurance from all parties involved in the conflict between Israeli and Palestinian forces will continue to comply with the ceasefire, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We have strong assurances from the relevant parties that they are committed to the ceasefire, and obviously this is something we'll be watching extremely closely in the coming days," Psaki said.

On Thursday, it was announced that the involved parties had agreed to a ceasefire, marking a tentative end to the 11-day conflict that left hundreds dead and many more wounded in both Israel and Gaza.

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Pandemic Did Not Disrupt US Missile Alert Crews Dispersed Globally - General

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – US troops on early warning missile alert duty during the 16 months of the COVID-19 pandemic did not miss a beat and remained fully alert and active at all times operating from globally dispersed locations, US Army Space and Missile Defense Command chief Lieutenant General Daniel Karbler said on Friday.

"We are globally dispersed [in] 11 different locations for missile early warning: Those crews have not missed a beat," Karbler told a podcast hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). "They have not missed a beat to support the army [and] multi-domain operations."

Despite the exacting and unprecedented challenges of having to operate through the pandemic, the command maintained full communications and warning alert capacity at all times, Karbler said.

The command teams continued "providing 24/7 critical satellite communications capability: Those crews, they stayed disciplined and they stayed ready in a COVID environment... Missile defense crews in Colorado and up there in Alaska, those crews stayed ready, he said. The command was also diversifying its early warning sensor capabilities and deploying such assets at high altitudes in the atmosphere as well as in space orbits where anti-satellite (ASAT) systems deployed by other nations could attack them, Karbler added.

"We can get the high altitude capabilities at 60,000 to 80,000 feet; everything doesn't have to be in satellites," he said.

Karbler also warned that funding for the Army's missile defense systems had to remain predictable, stable and sustained to prevent any deterioration in its effectiveness.

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New York Police Hate Crime Unit Says Probing Attack on Jewish Man Amid Gaza Protests
NEW YORK, May 21 (Sputnik) - The New York Police Hate Crime Task Force said on Friday that it was investigating an assault of a Jewish man by a group of protesters in Times Square. "The Hate Crime Task Force is investigating a gang assault of a Jewish man in Times Square," the task force said via Twitter.

The investigation was directed by New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo who decried the assault on a visibly Jewish man who was beaten up amid protests in midtown Manhattan.

"I unequivocally condemn these brutal attacks on visibly Jewish New Yorkers and we will not tolerate anti-Semitic violent gang harassment and intimidation," Cuomo said in a statement.

The New York police said it arrested 23-year-old Waseem Awawdeh, who used a crutch to assault the Jewish man. Awawdeh has been charged with hate crime assault, gang assault, menacing and criminal possession of a weapon, the police said.

The police said another incident during the same demonstration, involving a woman who was injured when professional grade fireworks were thrown toward bystanders, is also being investigated.

New York City held several protests over the past week in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian armed escalation.

Last week, a Sputnik correspondent reported clashes among pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian demonstrators attending a rally in front of the Consulate General of Israel in New York.

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US to Allow 22,000 Foreigners Opportunity to Work in Non-Agricultural Jobs Starting May 25

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will allow 22,000 foreign workers to temporarily work in non-agricultural jobs that have failed to attract US citizens starting May 25, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Friday.

"The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Labor (DOL) have published a joint temporary final rule making available an additional 22,000 H-2B temporary nonagricultural guest worker visas for fiscal year (FY) 2021 to employers who are likely to suffer irreparable harm without these additional workers," DHS said in a press release.

The US administration has reserved 16,000 temporary work visas for foreigners who have worked in the United States within the last three years, the release said.

The other 6,000 temporary work visas are reserved for foreigners from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the release said.

Businesses in the United States, especially fast-food restaurants and other low-wage paying companies, have struggled to hire from the American workforce, which has become reliant on federal coronavirus-related unemployment benefits that provide \$300 a week.

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United, Delta Airlines to Resume Flights to Israel After Ceasefire Announcement

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - United Airlines and Delta Air Lines will resume flights to Israel starting on Friday after nearly a ten-day break in air traffic due to clashes in the region according to the tracking website Flightradar24.

The United Airlines flight from New York to Tel Aviv is scheduled to depart at 11:00 p.m. ET and the Delta Air Lines flight at around midnight.

American Airlines, which also halted its flights to Israel due to safety concerns, has not yet scheduled any flights to Israel as flights on May 21-22 remain to be canceled, according to Flightradar24.

United and Delta canceled their flights to Tel Aviv on May 11 and American Airlines did the same the following day amid the escalating hostilities in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Later in the day, American Airlines said it will resume flights to Tel Aviv on May 24.

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Minnesota AG to Prosecute Case Against Officer Charged in Death of Daunte Wright

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The former Brooklyn Center police officer charged in the death of Daunte Wright, a 20-year old Black man, will have her case prosecuted, Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison announced on Friday.

"Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison announced today that he has accepted a request to lead the prosecution against former Brooklyn Center police officer Kim Potter, who is currently charged with second-degree manslaughter in the April 11, 2021 Brooklyn Center death of Daunte Wright," Ellison's office said in a statement.

Wright was shot dead by Potter, who allegedly mistook a handgun for a taser during a traffic stop. The shooting further escalated tensions already high amid the trial of former police officer Derek Chauvin over the death of George Floyd which was underway nearby at the time.

Ellison, who referred to Wright's death as a tragedy, promised to prosecute the case responsibly and consistently with the law, adding that he will be guided by the values of accountability and transparency.

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US Indicts FBI Employee for Stealing National Security Documents – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – An employee of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Kendra Kingsbury has been indicted for illegally stealing and retaining multiple national security documents over a period of more than a decade, the Justice Department said on Friday.

"An employee of the FBI's Kansas City Division has been indicted by a federal grand jury for illegally removing numerous national security documents that were found in her home," the Department said in a release. "Kendra Kingsbury, 48, of Dodge City, Kansas, was charged in a two-count indictment returned under seal by a federal grand jury in Kansas City, Missouri, on Tuesday, May 18."

The indictment alleges that Kingsbury improperly obtained and stored the classified documents between June 2004 to December 2017.

Some of the documents retained by Kingsbury contain information about al Qaeda (terrorist organization prohibited in Russia) members in Africa, including a suspected associate of Osama bin Laden, the release said.

For more than 12 years, Kingsbury worked as an intelligence analyst at FBI where she was assigned to different squads which focused on illegal drug trafficking, violent crime, and counterintelligence.

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US Dating Sites to Introduce Features to Encourage Coronavirus Vaccination - White House

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - A number of US online-dating sites, including Tinder, Badoo and Bumble, have introduced features to encourage vaccination among their users, Biden administration COVID-19 response team senior adviser Andrew Slavitt said on Friday.

"Today, dating sites like Bumble, Tinder, Hinge, OkCupid, BLK, Chispa, Plenty of Fish and Badoo are announcing a series of features to encourage vaccinations and help people meet people who have that universally attractive quality - they have been vaccinated against COVID-19. These sites cater to over 50 million people in the United States," Slavitt said.

The dating applications will allow users to display badges that show their vaccination status as well as to apply filters in order to see only people who have received coronavirus injections and offer premium content, Slavitt said.

Slavitt noted that according to one of the sites, OK Cupid, people who display their vaccination status are 14 percent more likely to get a match.

On May 4, US President Joe Biden announced his plan to administer at least one coronavirus injection to 70 percent of adults in the United States and fully inoculate 160 million residents by July 4.

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US Renews, Increases Military Aid to Lebanon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has renewed and increased their military aid funding to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), committing \$120 million for fiscal year 2021, the US State Department said in a statement on Friday.

"The US Department of State renewed its commitment to the LAF by announcing \$120 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance to Lebanon for fiscal year 2021," the statement said.

The decision came in the wake of the inaugural Defense Resourcing Conference between the United States and Lebanon, who is one of the largest recipients of US security assistance globally. The sum of \$120 million in aid represents a \$15 million increase over the previous year's levels.

The State Department added that they are looking forward to once again discussing their bilateral progress with Lebanon at the Defense Resourcing Conference next year.

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UN 'Very Concerned' By Clashes in East Jerusalem, Urges Restraint - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is very concerned about the continued clashes in East Jerusalem less than 24 hours after the Israel-Hamas ceasefire announcement, and calls on all parties to show restraint and avoid provocations, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Friday.

"We are obviously very concerned about the continuing tensions that we've seen today in occupied East Jerusalem, particularly in and around the Old City," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "It's very important that everyone honor the sanctity of the holy sites in the Old City, refrain from any provocation that could escalate tensions... show restraint."

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United, Delta Airlines to Resume Flights to Israel After Ceasefire Announcement

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Earlier in May, United and Delta canceled their flights to Tel Aviv starting on May 11 and American Airlines did the same the following day amid the escalating hostilities in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

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IMF Proposes \$50Bln Plan to Help End Coronavirus Pandemic - Senior Officials

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund has proposed investing about \$50 billion to help end the novel coronavirus pandemic, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva, Economic Counselor Gita Gopinath and Economist Ruchir Agarwal said in a blog post on Friday.

"The proposal's total cost of around \$50 billion would include grants, national government resources and concessional financing," the IMF officials said.

The proposal includes grant financing of at least \$35 billion and the G20 countries have already expressed readiness to cover more than half of this sum, according to the blog post.

The IMF officials pointed out that another \$15 billion could come from nations' authorities.

They also urged providing at least \$4 billion for COVAX vaccine distribution as well as ensuring free cross-border flows of raw materials and finished vaccines.

Restrictions of these flows are jeopardizing access to vaccines for billions of people in the developing world, they added.

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UN Relief Chief Allocates Additional \$4.5Mln to Support Gaza - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, May 21 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock on Friday allocated an additional \$4.5 million to provide humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians in Gaza, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a noon briefing.

"Mark Lowcock, the Emergency Relief Coordinator, today allocated \$4.5 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund towards the rising humanitarian needs in Gaza," Dujarric said. "This is in addition to the \$14.1 million, which he announced earlier this week for the occupied Palestinian territory."

Dujarric said the United Nations plans to issue next week a three-month interagency flash appeal to meet the needs of people affected by the fighting in Gaza and the West Bank.

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Withdrawal of Mercenaries Stalls in Libya, Entrenching Country's Division - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, May 21 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Libya Jan Kubis said on Friday the withdrawal of foreign fighters and mercenaries has recently stalled, contributing to further division of the country.

"Progress on key issues, such as... the start of the withdrawal of foreign mercenaries, fighters and foreign forces has stalled, thus entrenching the division of Libya," Kubis said.

According to the special envoy, the UN Support Mission in Libya has continued to receive reports of fortifications along the Sirte-Jufra line, training activities, cargoes of weapons into West, East and South Libyan military bases.

The continued use and presence of thousands of mercenaries represents a significant threat not only to Libya but to the region as a whole, Kubis said,

"The recent disturbing events in Chad again remind us of the interrelated nature and links between the security situation in Libya and the security and stability of the region," he pointed out.

The special envoy further stressed the necessity to ensure an orderly departure of all foreign fighters with their disarmament and reintegration into the countries of origin to reduce the risks of increasing instability in Libya and the region.

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Canada Extends Flight Ban on India, Pakistan Until June 21 Amid COVID-19 Concerns

TORONTO, May 21 (Sputnik) - Canada has extended its ban on passenger flights from India and Pakistan until June 21 amid a continued surge of coronavirus cases in the South Asian countries, Transport Canada said on Friday.

"Flight restrictions pursuant to section 5.1 of the Aeronautics Act, the Minister of Transport is of the opinion it is necessary for aviation safety and the protection of the public, to prohibit the [operations] of [aircraft] involved in [scheduled] and non-[scheduled] [international] commercial air [service] from India or Pakistan, for the transport of passengers on an inbound [flight] to Canada," the federal department said in a notice to airmen (NOTAM).

The ban also applies to private and charter aircraft, the notice said. However, cargo, flight crew repatriation and ferry flights, as well as flights that make technical stops in India and Pakistan, are exempt from the order.

The notice makes no mention of alterations to the public health measures imposed in the original ban, meaning passengers departing for Canada from India or Pakistan via a connecting flight will still be required to submit a negative coronavirus test at their last point of departure.

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Home Sales in US Decrease for 3rd Month in Row - National Association of Realtors

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - Sales of existing homes in the United States fell for a third month in a row in April as supply continued to lag demand in what is referred to as a red-hot market, the National Association of Realtors (NAR) said on Friday.

Completed transactions for lived-in single-family homes, town houses, condominiums and co-ops slipped 2.7 percent last month compared with March, the realtors group said. But year-over-year sales increased 33.9 percent.

"Despite the decline, housing demand is still strong compared to one year ago," NAR Chief Economist Lawrence Yun said in a statement. "We'll see more inventory come to the market later this year... the additional supply projected for the market should cool down the torrid pace of price appreciation."

The median existing-home price for all housing types in April was \$341,600, up 19.1 percent from the April 2020 average of \$286,800, as every region in the United States recorded price increases, the statement said.

"This is a record high and marks 110 straight months of year-over-year gains," the statement added.

The housing market is one of the pillars of the US economy, accounting for nearly 15 percent of Gross Domestic Product. Housing has been the star performer in the economy's recovery from the COVID-19-induced recession, which started in February 2020.

Residential construction investment has enjoyed double-digit growth since the third quarter of last year. Even so, home builders deliberately slowed activity in April to avoid advance buying of building materials such as lumber, which had rallied more than 300 percent in price this year, according to the available data.

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UN Rights Experts Call For ICC Probe Into Attacks on Civilians in Israel, Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, May 21 (Sputnik) - UN human rights experts urged the International Criminal Court (ICC) to launch an investigation into the attacks on civilians and other violations of human rights in the Gaza Strip and Israel, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said in a statement on Friday.

"The experts urged the ICC to investigate acts by all parties which violate the Rome Statute, especially war crimes, including targeting of civilians, the massive and indiscriminate violations of the right to adequate housing, and to investigate acts and policies that have taken place during the conflict, or have contributed to it, that may amount to the crime of apartheid and crimes against humanity," the statement said.

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US Joined by 6 Central, Southern European Nations in Air Defense Drills - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – Military personnel from six countries rounded up nine days of the Astral Knight 21 air and missile defense exercise in several locations in Europe, US Major General Greg Semmel told reporters on Friday.

"We had several countries – Albania, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia and obviously the United States involved in this year's Astral Knight 21," Semmel said during press briefing. "Each country brought quite a bit of capability to the exercise, whether it be the military ground units with their surface-to-air defensive units or their aircraft "

The drill took place in different locations in Italy, Croatia, Greece and Slovenia.

Semmel avoided discussing Russia when asked about the possibility of a "hot engagement" with its military units in the Black Sea.

"Ultimately, the objective of the message of the exercise is to train together side by side to learn from each other, to have a collective security, to send the message of deterrence to any threat or aggression throughout European theater, specifically South-East European theater," he said.

Participating aircraft include US F-15E Strike Eagle, F-16 Fighting Falcon, HH-60 Pave Hawk, C-130J Super Hercules aircraft, Italian Air Force F-35 Lightning II aircraft, Hellenic Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon and Emb-145 Eerie aircraft, and Croatian MiG-21 BisD/UMD aircraft, Pentagon said earlier.

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Reagan's Ex-Advisor Says Wants Russian Citizenship But Has Not Filed Forms Yet

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – US writer and scholar on Russia, Suzanne Massie, who was an advisor to President Ronald Reagan, told Sputnik on Friday that she wanted to obtain Russian citizenship to aid in her work and writing but has not filed official papers yet.

"I have not [filed] any official form yet," Massie said.

Massie, 90, asked Russian President Vladimir Putin for Russian citizenship in a televised appearance on national broadcaster NTV in Moscow. She attended the May 9 Victory Day parade in Moscow.

The Kremlin said earlier this week it has not yet considered Massie's request.

Speaking of the reasons for her request, Massie explained that Russian citizenship will allow her to spend more time in Russia and write books.

"I have spent forty years traveling and working in Russia, and writing books about Russia," she said. "I am now in the process of writing a new book and will need to spend longer periods in Russia."

The process of getting visas now is "endless and difficult," Massie added.

Massie advised Reagan on Russia from 1984-1988 and played a significant role in the final years of the Cold War. She taught the president a Russian proverb, "trust, but verify," which he famously used during nuclear disarmament talks with the Soviet Union.

Massie is fluent in Russian and has written numerous books on Russian history and culture, including bestsellers *Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia*, as well as *Trust but Verify: Reagan, Russia and Me*.

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US Pays \$6.1Bln to Prevent Evictions as 12Mln People Might Miss Rent Next Month - Treasury

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has spent nearly a third of funds allocated to prevent the eviction of home tenants during the COVID-19 pandemic within two weeks, as some 12 million Americans are at risk of missing rent payments by next month, the Treasury Department said Friday.

Reporting on the status of the \$21.6 billion Emergency Rental Assistance program, the Treasury said it distributed \$6.1 billion in less than two weeks after the fund was established.

"Nearly 7 million Americans reported being behind on rent in the second half of April 2021, and more than 40 percent of those renters worry that they could be evicted sometime in the next two months," the department said in a statement. "There are almost 12 million Americans who lack confidence that they can make next month's rent."

Evictions can have long-lasting consequences for families — potentially disrupting school, worsening health, displacing neighborhood networks of support — and making it more difficult to find safe, affordable housing in the future, the department added.

"The pandemic has exacerbated America's already severe housing affordability crisis, threatening the security and livelihoods of families and landlords through no fault of their own," Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo said in the statement. "Treasury is committed to providing direct, rapid support to those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and addressing the deep disparities in our housing systems that threaten our economic recovery."

While US landlord-tenant law has improved dramatically in recent history, it still fails to protect tenants from broad injustice and lasting harm, as eviction processes vary from state to state, data shows.

In some states, landlords engage in so-called serial-eviction-filing with the intent not to remove tenants, but to collect rent and additional fees that leave tenants to foot bills that could include as much as \$180 in fines and fees per filing. The action also leaves damaging eviction filing marks on the record of such tenants, making it harder for them to obtain credit or new tenancy approvals in the future, data shows.

The Eviction Lab, an advocacy group for tenants, found that in some states, households facing eviction had notices filed repeatedly against the same address, raising costs by 20 percent each time.

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US Vice President Harris Says World Needs New Mechanism to Finance Health Security

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – US Vice President Kamala Harris said on Friday that the world needs a new sustainable mechanism to finance health security in order to prepare for future crises after the global community appeared unready to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. “We have the opportunity now to change this, before the next crisis hits, and we must establish a new and sustainable mechanism to finance health security,” Harris said at the World Health Organization's Global Health Summit. “At the country level, we must budget for health security, as we do for national security, ensuring that the actions we take this year are not a one-off. The cost to prepare may seem high, however, the cost of failing to prepare is far higher.” The vice president pointed out that the world was not ready for the COVID-19 pandemic with few incentives in place to encourage preparedness while the mechanisms to respond effectively and ensure accountability were far too slow. Harris also noted that the world needs a group of leaders who are prepared to act without hesitation at first warning to stop an outbreak from becoming a catastrophe. As of Friday, nearly 166 million COVID-19 infections have been detected since the beginning of the pandemic, with over 3.4 million deaths from the disease.

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Deputy US Secretary of State to Travel to Brussels, Ankara Next Week - State Dept

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - Wendy R. Sherman, the Deputy Secretary of State for the US, will be traveling to a number of cities around the world in the coming weeks, with the first two stops being in Brussels and Ankara, the State Department said on Friday. “Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman will travel to Brussels, Ankara, Jakarta, Phnom Penh, Bangkok, and Honolulu May 25 to June 4,” the State Department said. Sherman will begin her trip in Brussels, where she is expected to meet with a variety of foreign counterparts representing Belgium, the EU, and NATO to discuss issues including COVID-19 recovery and combating the influence of malign foreign actors. She will also lead the first meeting of the US-EU Dialogue on China. Following this, Sherman will travel to Ankara. There, she will engage with various representatives of the Turkish government and civil society to discuss the US-Turkey relationship, particularly within the context of working together as NATO allies. In addition to these initial destinations, Sherman will travel to Southeast Asia where she will meet with officials in Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, and finally, Hawaii.